Psalm 113-118: The Hallel and the Passover

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Psalm 118 is quoted a number of times in the Apostolic Scriptures, and several times in the Gospels as well. One key quote was recorded during the Triumphal Entry of Yeshua into Yerushalayim on Lamb Selection Day before His death on Pesakh:

> "On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began to shout, 'Hosanna! "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," even the King of Israel.'"
>
> *John 12:12–13*

This is actually a direct quote from Psa. 118:26. The sages of Israel recognized that Psalms 113-118 — called "the Hallel" — were apropos for 18 days of the year: Pesakh and the seven days of Unleavened Bread, Shavuot/Pentecost, seven days of Sukkot/Tabernacles and Shmeni Atzeret/The Eighth Day and Chanukah. Pilgrims sang it on the way to Yerushalayim for one pivotal Lamb Selection Day, the 10th day of the first month of God's calendar (John 12:12–13; Luke 19:37–38; Matt. 21:8–9; Mark 11:8–10).Pilgrims did sing psalms while going up that were closely connected with the Hallel: "From all parts of the land and from foreign countries the festive pilgrims had come up in bands, singing their pilgrim psalms, and bringing with them burnt- and peace-offerings, according as the Lord had blessed them; for none might appear empty before Him (Exo 23:15; Deut 16:16,17)" (Alfred Edersheim, "The Passover," *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services,* Chapter 11.). What these pilgrim psalms were has been debated. One view of the Shirot ha-Ma'alot (Songs of Ascent/Steps), Psalms 120-134, is that they were sung by

pilgrims going up to Yerushalayim (Tremper Longman III, “Psalms,” *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2014), 409-10. Allen P. Ross, “Psalms,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvood and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1985), 1:882.). But a long-held view of the Shirot ha-Ma’alot is they relate to the 15 steps of the Second Temple from which the Levite musicians/chorus would perform (m.Middot 2:5; Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*). The Hallel psalms also were part of the temple liturgy on Passover (b.Pesachim 9:3/95b).

In the first century AD, the priests would chant the Hallel during the sacrifice of the Paschal lambs in the Temple.

This Hallel, particularly Psalms 113-114, is also called the “Egyptian Hallel” to distinguish it from the “Great Hallel” in Psalms 120-135, also called the Psalms of Ascent because they are recited during Sukkot. Interestingly, Psalm 119, with its focus on the beauty of the law of God, is sandwiched between.

The family celebration of Pesakh was a relatively simple affair in the first century: roasted lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs and four cups of wine. After the fourth cup, which is called the cup of rest, the family would read or sing “a hymn,” which is usually Psalms 115-118. What is God saving us from and giving us rest from? What kind of slavery is He redeeming us from? Man may be free but they are in chains. When they live in unrestrained “freedom” we are in bondage.

We see three groups singled out in this Hallel: Israel, Aaron and “those who fear God.” Aren’t the people in the “those who fear God” be in the first group? Maybe they haven’t been adopted yet. Those who “fear God” are the Gentiles who were actually more receptive to God’s Messiah than those who He called His own.

The sages understood that Psalm 118, which is the culmination of the “Egyptian Hallel” was about the Messiah. Alfred Eldersheim notes how the sages found five themes in the Hallel that fit with Pesakh: “According to the Talmud, the Hallel recorded five things, the coming out of Egypt, the dividing of the sea, the giving of the law, the resurrection of the dead and the lot of the Messiah.”

These themes fit perfectly with Yeshua’s presence in the Temple on Lamb Selection Day, His death on Pesakh and resurrection on First Fruits.

We will go through each of these Psalms. The phrase “Hallelu Yah” — *praise the Lord* — shows up frequently in these Psalms. That is why they are nicknamed “the Hallel.”

We look forward to singing an addendum to the Hallel at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb as foretold in Rev. 19:1-9. The words that a number of Bible translations put in all caps actually are quotes from the *TaNaKh* (Torah, Prophets and Writings, i.e. the Hebrew scriptures): Psa. 19:9, Deut. 32:42-43 and Isa. 34:8-10.

Banner: Every day is a good day to sing Hallelujah but Passover is an especially relevant time to sing this praise. (Banner by Freeimages.com/Billy Alexander)

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